

Shabbat *Chayei Sarah* ♦ Congregation Netivot Shalom  
22 Heshvan 5785 / November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you Rabbi Chai for inviting me to be here – The Netivot community is so special and I'm truly honored to be among you all. We also have several board members and staff here so thank you to Deb, Shannon, Janet and Talya for your incredible dedication to empowering women and making every Jewish home a safe one.

This month, synagogues throughout the Bay Area are devoting their drashot to the topic of domestic violence in Jewish homes.

Why is this important? Because it is an issue that affects 1 in 4 Jewish families and 1 in 3 teen relationships. Because we are in an era where all the advances we've made about women's bodily autonomy and self determination seem to be rolling back to the dark ages. Because most of us probably know someone who's been affected by intimate partner abuse – even if we don't think we do.

When we look for the signs - when we make it known that we are someone safe to talk to - we begin to see just how common abuse is, even in our own beautiful small Jewish community. And when we see it, we can stop it. ***If you want to talk more about how we stop it, and so much more, please join me for the after-kiddush talk.***

In our Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*, we learn some key lessons about intimate relationships. Ironically, Parshat "Chayei Sarah," or the Life of Sarah, tells the story of her death, not her life. But in so doing we get the opportunity to learn about her, and how her legacy will live on as the next matriarch, Rivka, is introduced to us here.

When Abraham purchases the burial cave for Sarah, he establishes the physical and spiritual home of the Jewish people. Today, we re-create that physical and spiritual home when we build our synagogues, make a Jewish home, or build community together. Within the walls of our homes and congregations, we all should all have that feeling of sacred space. That's why we have a core Jewish value of *sh'lom bayit*, of peace in the home - where

the name of our organization comes from. Despite a long history of wandering and danger and attacks on our community - or perhaps because of it - we've learned to create safety and home wherever we are.

In order to feel like sacred space, a home has to do at least two things: protect us physically and nourish us spiritually and emotionally.

But 1 in 4 Jewish women and gender non-conforming folks don't live that reality of feeling safe at home. 1 in 4 - the same as the general population.

41 years into my work in this field, I still find that shocking. At such a magnitude we can't call this an "interpersonal issue," a "private family matter," or even a "women's issue." It's a societal and communal problem that requires our communal response.

**Three of the most important ways we can respond as a community are**

- **#1 to break the silence about this issue, to talk about it -**
- **#2 to create a safe space for survivors to come forward if this is happening to them, and then believe women when they do bravely speak their truth –**
- **and #3 to consider how we hold the harm-doers accountable, because they are people in our midst too.** Often, gender-based violence happens simply because we allow it to go unchecked.

A common question I get asked is "why women stay." Well that is entirely the wrong question. We should not be blaming a victim for being harmed. We should instead be asking, "why did he do this to her? And how is it that we as a community let it happen? Is it ok for someone to abuse their partner, or kids, or coworker and still show up in our communal lives to teach Torah or lead a committee or go to work like nothing happened?"

It's easy to sit in judgment on the outside and say "well if I were in that situation I'd..." [fill in the blank]. But it's actually quite complicated and hard to get out of the trap of an abusive relationship. There are so many barriers to "just leaving": Fear. Family. Finances. Friends, Faith. Love.

Fear – because abusers threaten terrible consequences. And often those come true. Statistically, it can be more dangerous to leave than to stay. I'll get more into that in my after-kiddush talk, so stick around for that later. But I do want to say a word about the last one: Love.

Many people try to work it out because of love. This is after all the person you fell in love with, who professed to love and care for you and be your closest person. In Psalm 55 we read, *“Oh that I had the wings of a dove, I would fly away and find rest. I would soon find me a refuge from the sweeping wind, from the tempest. It is not an enemy who reviles me--I could bear that. It is not my foe who vaunts himself against me – I could hide from him. But it is YOU: my equal, my companion, my friend. His talk was smoother than butter, yet his mind was on war. His words were more soothing than oil; yet they were drawn swords. “*

That is what it's like to be controlled and manipulated by the very person who is supposedly your most trusted beloved, your *ezer kenegdo* or helpmeet, to quote a phrase from Bereshit 2:18 .

Abusive relationships are not necessarily bad *all the time*. Often there is a cycle, and during the calm “honeymoon” period abusers use the love bomb – or love balm – almost as a brainwashing tool to keep the other person hooked in.

Who wouldn't want their relationship to work out, the kids to be able to live with both their parents? The problem to get better? So rarely does the problem get better, though....so rarely does the abusive partner take responsibility for their actions, change their behavior, stop the abuse. So it is vitally important to see warning signs before we're trapped in something we can't easily get out of.

That is why Shalom Bayit works with 1200 teens, parents, and Jewish educators each year through our *Love Shouldn't Hurt* program to give young people tools for building healthy friendships, peer and dating relationships. And it's why we offer educational programs that reach another 2,000 adults each year to help our community prevent and respond to abuse.

In Parshat Chayei Sarah, Abraham is on a couple of big missions. After he purchases Sarah's burial cave, his next move is to find a wife for their son Isaac. He sends Eliezer out on this quest. When Eliezer encounters Rebecca, she gives him water. Then she notices that his camel is thirsty too and offers water for the camel. She didn't have to do that - Rebecca was royalty and didn't have to get anyone water at all. But this spoke to who she was: a humble, thoughtful person who treated others as her equal. On these merits Eliezer picks Rivka, and this is our first Torah wisdom about choosing partners for a healthy relationship.

But the story doesn't stop there. When the family is asked permission to take Rebecca back to Canaan to marry Isaac, they don't just say yes – they ask Rebecca what SHE thinks. [*Gen.24:57 "Let us call the girl and ask for her reply."*] Novel concept, right?

It is Rebecca who says "I will go." From this, Rashi comments that it is understood that women should give consent to marriage – a big departure from the cultural norm of the time, of women-as-property. And here we have our 2<sup>nd</sup> piece of Torah wisdom: the Halacha that a woman must be asked if she consents to marry (as opposed to her being "given away" by her family). **So it is within this week's Parsha that Judaism declares women's autonomy in an intimate relationship, women's right to be at the center of our own life's narrative.**

Both Sarah and Rivka were strong, fiercely loving, wise women. Both maintained healthy partnerships based in equality, love, trust and mutual respect. Their relationships were not perfect. But Sarah and Abraham, and Rebecca and Isaac, showed us that true partnership means getting through both good times and bad without losing the core of mutual respect, admiration, *chesed* / lovingkindness, and an open heart.

Sarah and Abraham faced many challenges together, sometimes disagreed, compromised and placed a common good above their personal benefit. In a healthy relationship, it is safe to disagree, and to make mistakes.

Abusive relationships on the other hand are marked by patterns of control, and power imbalance. One person consistently dominates the other through

a variety of tactics: fear, intimidation, threats, emotional manipulation, verbal abuse, financial control, sexual coercion, electronic surveillance or stalking, or sometimes—but not always—physical violence. Strategies that would work to resolve conflict or “work it out” in a healthy relationship don’t apply, because there isn’t an equal playing field.

We hear these patterns in the stories of the 135 women who’ve sought Shalom Bayit’s support so far this year. We offer them counseling, safety planning, critical resources and a hand to hold. We also guide family members, friends, rabbis, and others supporting survivors to break free.

The people who call our helpline are from all pockets of Jewish community, all ages, personality types and sexual orientations. Some are Jewish professionals, preschool parents, grandparents; some are college students, some newly dating and others married for 20 years. Why don’t we all know this? Because most of the time, they keep their private terror from the public eye. They learn to say everything is fine at home, and we believe them because we may not see their partner’s controlling behavior.

We reinforce what I call the *Shonda* factor – the shame and silencing—because we don’t make space for the messy realities of life. Our attachment to the idea that “we don’t have those problems” like addiction, or mental health struggles, or abuse – creates an environment where admitting something is wrong is seen as betraying a communal norm, so you feel pressured to keep up the image to be like everyone else.

Earlier I spoke of our beautiful Jewish value of *sh’lom bayit*, peace in the home. Historically, that concept has actually been turned on its head to mean that women are responsible for “keeping the peace” - maintaining the IMAGE that everything is perfect even if it’s not. That’s why in Israel you’ll never see a domestic violence program called *sh’lom bayit* because the phrase evokes a patriarchal problem of blaming women for anything that goes wrong at home.

But here we reclaim that phrase to represent the community we want to build: one where we all treat each other *b’zellel elohim*, as beings created in the divine image. The great philosopher Martin Buber taught that we

should all treat each other with the holiness of I-thou relationships....as if that other person in front of you, no matter who they are to you, is as holy and sacred as you are.

Imagine if we all walked through the world seeing the OTHER - our partner, parent, someone we don't agree with, someone with a radically different political view or who we just plain don't like at all - imagine if we still were able to look into their eyes and treat them with dignity and see the spark of divine in them. What a beautiful world this would be.

This is the world I'm imagining.

As we attune to the examples of Sarah and Rivka, may we seek to build relationships grounded in respect where we each elevate the dignity and strength of the other. Where we resolve conflict peacefully and with love. Where no one lives in fear. Where healthy boundaries are valued as a gift. Where we treat each other as the blessed, holy beings that we are.

When we say the Priestly blessing to our children on Shabbat - may you be like Sarah, Avraham, Rivka, and Yitzchak - may we also MODEL for them the qualities of our ancestors so they can learn to choose healthy relationships.

And when we see signs that someone is at risk in their home or relationship, may we welcome the stranger into our tent. Believe them. Create the safe space for them to speak their truth without shame, listen to their story with a full heart, ask how we can support. And help them to feel deserving of being treated with respect.

May all of us create and BE the change we want to see.

Shabbat Shalom.

